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Middle East Chaos

By Conn Hallinan
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The splintering of the powerful Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) into warring camps—with Qatar, supported by Turkey and Iran, on one side, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), supported by Egypt, on the other—has less to do with disagreements over foreign policy and religion than with internal political and economic developments in the Middle East. The ostensible rationale the GCC gave on June 4 for breaking relations with Qatar and placing the tiny country under a blockade is that Doha is aiding “terrorist” organizations. The real reasons are considerably more complex, particularly among the major players.

Middle East journalist Patrick Cockburn once described the Syrian civil war as a three-dimensional chess game with five players and no rules. In the case of the Qatar crisis, the players have doubled and abandoned the symmetry of the chessboard for “Go,” Mahjong, and Bridge.

Tensions among members of the GCC are longstanding. In the case of Qatar, they date back to 1995, when the father of the current ruler, Emir Tamin Al Thani, shoved his own father out of power. According to Simon Henderson of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Saudi Arabia and the UAE “regarded the family coup as a dangerous precedent to Gulf ruling families” and tried to organize a counter coup. The coup was exposed, however, and called off.

Riyadh is demanding that Qatar sever relations with Iran—an improbable outcome given that the two countries share a natural gas field in the Persian Gulf—and end Doha’s cozy ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, if there is any entity in the Middle East that the Saudis hate—and fear—more than Iran, it is the Brotherhood. Riyadh was instrumental in the 2013 overthrow of the Brotherhood government in Egypt and has allied itself with the Israelis to marginalize Hamas, the Palestinian version of the Brotherhood that dominates Gaza.

But fault lines in the GCC do not run only between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Oman, at the Gulf’s mouth, has always marched to its own drummer, maintaining close ties with Saudi Arabia’s regional nemesis, Iran, and refusing to go along with Riyadh’s war against the Houthis in Yemen. Kuwait has also balked at Saudi dominance of the GCC, has refused to join the blockade against Doha, and is trying to play mediator in the current crisis.

The siege of Qatar was launched shortly after Donald Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia, when the Saudi’s put on a show for the U.S. President that was over the top even by the monarchy’s standards. Wooed with massive billboards and garish sword dances, Trump soaked up the Saudi’s view of the Middle East, attacked Iran as a supporter of terrorism and apparently green-lighted the blockade of Qatar. He even tried to take credit for it.

Saudi Arabia, backed by Bahrain, Egypt, and the UAE, along with a cast of minor players, made 13 demands on Doha that it could only meet by abandoning its sovereignty. They range from the impossible—end all contacts with Iran—to the improbable—close the Turkish base—to the unlikely—dismantle the popular and lucrative media giant, Al Jazeera. The “terrorists” Doha is accused of supporting are the Brotherhood, which the Saudi’s and the Egyptians consider a terrorist organization, an opinion not shared by the U.S. or the European Union.

On the surface this is about Sunni Saudi Arabia vs. Shiite Iran, but while religious differences do play an important role in recruiting and motivating some of the players, this is not a battle over a schism in Islam. Most importantly, it is not about “terrorism,” since many of the countries involved are up to their elbows in supporting extremist organizations. Indeed, Saudi Arabia’s reactionary Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is the root ideology for groups like the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, and all the parties are backing a variety of extremists in Syria and Libya’s civil wars.

The attack on Qatar is part of Saudi Arabia’s aggressive new foreign policy that is being led by Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman. Since being declared “monarch-in-waiting” by King Salman Al Saud, Mohammed has launched a disastrous war in Yemen that has killed more than 10,000 civilians, sparked a country-wide cholera epidemic, and drains at least \$700 million a month from Saudi Arabia’s treasury. Given the depressed price for oil and a growing population—70 percent of which is under 30 and much of it unemployed—it is not a cost the monarchy can continue sustain, especially with the Saudi economy falling into recession.

Underlying the Saudi’s new-found aggression is fear. First, fear that the kind of Islamic governance modeled by the Muslim Brotherhood poses a threat to the absolutism of the Gulf monarchs. Fear that Iran’s nuclear pact with the U.S., the EU and the UN is allowing Tehran to

break out of its economic isolation and turn itself into a rival power center in the Middle East. And fear that anything but a united front by the GCC—led by Riyadh—will encourage the House of Saud’s internal and external critics.

So far, the attempt to blockade Qatar has been more an annoyance than a serious threat to Doha. Turkey and Iran are pouring supplies into Qatar, and the Turks are deploying up to 1,000 troops at a base near the capital. There are also some 10,000 U.S. troops at Qatar’s Al Udeid Airfield, Washington’s largest base in the Middle East and one central to the war on the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Any invasion aimed at overthrowing the Qatar regime risks a clash with Turkey and the U.S.

While Egypt is part of the anti-Qatari alliance—the Egyptians are angry at Doha for not supporting Cairo’s side in the Libyan civil war, and the Egyptian regime also hates the Brotherhood—it is hardly an enthusiastic ally. Saudi Arabia keeps Egypt’s economy afloat, and so long as the Riyadh keeps writing checks, Cairo is on board. But Egypt is keeping the Yemen war at arm’s length—it flat out refused to contribute troops and is not comfortable with Saudi Arabia’s version of Islam. Cairo is currently in a nasty fight with its own Wahhabist-inspired extremists. Egypt also maintains diplomatic relations with Iran.

Besides the UAE, the other Saudi allies don’t count for much in this fight. Sudan will send troops—if Riyadh pays for them—but not very many. Bahrain is on board, but only because the Saudi and UAE armies are sitting on local Shiite opposition. Yemen and Libya are part of the anti-Qatar alliance, but both are essentially failed states. And while the Maldives is a nice place to vacation, it doesn’t have a lot of weight to throw around.

On the other hand, long-time Saudi ally Pakistan has made it clear it is not part of this blockade, nor will it break with Qatar or downgrade relations with Iran. When Riyadh asked for Pakistan troops in Yemen, the national parliament voted unanimously to have nothing to do with Riyadh’s jihad on the poorest country in the Middle East.

The largely Muslim nations of Malaysia and Indonesia are also maintaining relations with Qatar, and Saudi ally Morocco offered to send food to Doha. In brief, it is not clear who is more isolated here.

While President Trump supports the Saudis, his Defense Department and State Department are working to resolve the crisis. U.S. Sec. of State Rex Tillerson just finished a trip to the Gulf in an effort to end the blockade, and the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee is threatening to hold up arms sales to Riyadh unless the dispute is resolved. The latter is no minor threat. Saudi Arabia would have serious difficulties carrying out the war in Yemen without U.S. weaponry.

And the reverse of the coin?

Doha’s allies have a variety of agendas, not all of which mesh.

Iran has correct, but hardly warm, relations with Qatar. Both countries need to cooperate to exploit the South Pars gas field, and Tehran appreciated that Doha was always a reluctant member of the anti-Iran coalition, telling the U.S. it could not use Qatari bases to attack Iran.

Iran is certainly interested in anything that divides the GCC. The Iranians would also like Qatar to invest in upgrading Iran's energy industry and maybe cutting them in on the \$177 billion in construction projects that Doha is lining up in preparation for hosting the 2022 World Cup Games. Also, some 30,000 Iranians live in Qatar.

Figuring out Turkey these days can reduce one to reading tea leaves.

On one hand, Ankara's support for Qatar seems obvious. Qatar backs the Brotherhood, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party is a Turkish variety of the Brotherhood, albeit one focused more on power than ideology. Erdogan was a strong supporter of the Egyptian Brotherhood and relations between Cairo and Ankara went into the deep freeze when Egypt's military overthrew the Islamist organization.

Qatar is also an important source of finances for Ankara, whose fragile economy needs every bit of help it can get. Turkey's large construction industry would like to land some of the multi-billion construction contracts the World Cup games will generate. Turkish construction projects in Qatar already amount to \$13.7 billion.

On the other hand, Turkey is also trying to woo Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies for their investments. Erdogan even joined in the GCC's attacks on Iran last spring, accusing Tehran of "Persian nationalist expansion," a comment that distressed Turkey's business community. As the sanctions on Iran ease, Turkish firms see that country's big, well-educated population as a potential gold mine.

The Turkish President has since turned down the anti-Iran rhetoric, and Ankara and Tehran have been consulting over the Qatar crisis. The first supportive phone call Erdogan took during the attempted coup last year was from Qatar's emir, and the prickly Turkish President has not forgotten that some other GCC members were silent for several days. Erdogan recently suggested that the UAE had a hand in the coup.

Is this personal for Turkey's president? No, but Erdogan is the Middle East leader who most resembles Donald Trump: he shoots from the hip and holds grudges. The difference is that he is far smarter and better informed than the U.S. President and knows when to cut his losses.

His apology to the Russians after shooting down one of their fighter-bombers is a case in point. Erdogan first threatened Moscow with war, but eventually trotted off to St. Petersburg, hat in hand, to make nice with Russian President Vladimir Putin. And after hinting that the Americans were behind the 2016 coup, he recently met with Tillerson in Istanbul to smooth things out. Turkey recognizes that it will need Moscow and Washington to settle the war in Syria.

The Russians have been carefully neutral, consulted with Turkey and Iran, and have called on all parties to peacefully resolve their differences.

There is not likely to be a quick end to the Qatar crisis, because Saudi Arabia keeps doubling down on one disastrous foreign policy decision after another, including breaking up the Arab world's only viable economic bloc. But there are developments in the region that may eventually force Riyadh to back off.

The Syrian War looks like it is headed for a solution, although the outcome is anything but certain. The Yemen War has reached crisis proportions—the UN describes it as the number one human emergency on the globe—and pressure is growing for the U.S. and Britain to wind down their support for the Saudi alliance. And Iran is slowly but steadily reclaiming its role as a leading force in the Middle East and Central Asia.

There is much that could go wrong. There could be a disastrous war with Iran, currently being pushed by Saudi Arabia, Israel and neo-conservatives in the U.S. and Russia, the U.S. and Turkey could fall out over Syria. The Middle East is an easy place to get into trouble. But if there are dangers, so too are there possibilities, and from those springs hope.